

“Human beings need symbols.

Symbols are important to us — anyone in the armed forces recognizes that. The beauty of this structure will be like that of all good art: It will mean different things to different people. To young people who know nothing of air power, it will be a focal point to learn about air power. To others, who are not so young, it will be a memorial to the many accomplishments and deeds of Airmen. To those on active duty, it will be a sign of pride that they walk in the footsteps of great men and great women and that they have an obligation to build upon that. And to others, this edifice will be a symbol of the reaching of American air power, of American space power and of the men and women who make up the U.S. Air Force.”

*— former Secretary of the Air Force
Dr. James G. Roche*

The three spires of the Air Force memorial soar to a height of 270 feet. The spires represent the Air Force's core values — integrity, service before self and excellence in all we do.

**Memorial symbolizes
sacrifice, celebrates service**

by Staff Sgt. Julie Weckerlein
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On top of a ridge a stone's throw from Arlington National Cemetery, the Air Force Memorial basks among some famous companions. The Marine Corps Iwo Jima Memorial — its flag always waving — is nearby. So is the Netherlands Carillon — a gift from the grateful Dutch people for America's help during and after World War II.

From the memorial's massive blocks of granite — pure and black from Zimbabwe — spires shoot off into the sky like jets. A bronze honor guard stands ready and a glass wall holds meditative inscriptions.

The memorial marks the spot America chose to honor the Airmen who built the Air Force. And it pays homage to future Airmen. It's a fitting site for a memorial — and what a view. Located on Arlington Ridge, it overlooks the Pentagon. And it's a couple of hundred yards from Fort Myers, Va.

“Everyone is in awe with it when they get to the point below the spires,” said retired Maj. Gen. Edward Grillo Jr., who's spent countless hours at the memorial construction site as president of the foundation responsible for its construction. “You can't get that view from anywhere else.”

That view will be available to the public Oct. 14 when the Memorial opens with a ceremony in conjunction with the kick off to the service's 60th anniversary celebration. In one sweeping glance, a visitor can

see a complete panorama of the nation’s capital, from the National Cathedral to the Pentagon to the Ronald Reagan National Airport.

“The view itself is amazing, but when standing in the shadows of these spires, you can’t help but feel overwhelmed by its design, and how it’s so graceful and bold,” said General Grillo, “sort of like flight itself.”

Up until now, the Air Force was the only branch of military service not to have a monument of any kind in the area. Yet, some 54,000 Airmen have been killed while serving in the Air Force and its predecessor organizations.

It wasn’t until the 1990s, though, that commemoration of the service was considered.

“We’re long overdue to have a memorial here in Washington to the sacrifices Airmen have made since the beginning of powered flight,” said Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. T. Michael Moseley. “This is a tribute to those people who are out there in harm’s way.”

The Air Force Memorial Foundation was incorporated in January 1992 with a mission to gain support for its cause. It wasn’t easy getting the project off the ground, though. Over the years, it went through two designs and two locations before a site up the road from the Pentagon, adjacent to Arlington Cemetery, was chosen.

The selected design features three stainless steel spires that soar skyward, reminiscent of the precision “bomb burst” maneuver performed by the U.S. Air Force Thunderbirds Demonstration Team. The three spires also represent the three core values of the Air Force — integrity first, service before self, and excellence in all we do. Many have pointed out, too, that the three spires represent the Total Force — active, Guard and Reserve Airmen.

Visitors will also see the paved “Runway to Glory” at the site entrance, a larger-than-life bronze Honor Guard statue created by sculptor Zenos Frudakis, two granite inscription walls at both ends of the parade ground and a glass contemplation wall depicting the “missing man formation” to honor fallen Airmen. Inscriptions include quotes from senior leaders, detailed listings of important Air Force missions, as well as a list of Airmen who have earned the Medal of Honor.

James Ingo Freed was the architect responsible for the design, as well as many other Washington D.C.-area buildings. But the Air Force Memorial, he said, was particularly challenging.

“[It] is rooted in the necessary symbolic transition of making the medium for the Air Force visible,” said Mr. Freed. “The Navy has the medium of water, which can always be shown in fountains, and the Army has the medium of land, which can be referenced with mountains and plains. The Air Force has the medium of air, which is very difficult to show.”

He was inspired after seeing F-16s in flight, and thus emulated the graceful arches of their air acrobatics.

“The memorial itself is 270 feet high and appears to be soaring. Its array of arcs against the sky evokes a modern



Two inscription walls are located at each end of the central lawn. Retired Maj. Gen. Edward F. Grillo Jr., president of the Air Force Memorial Foundation, reviews the status of the south wall, which will honor Air Force values and campaign accomplishments. The north wall will honor the valor and sacrifices made by so many Airmen.

image of flight by jet and space vehicles,” he said.

Unfortunately, Mr. Freed passed away in the winter of 2005.

“It’s a shame he’s not going to be able to see the end result of his vision,” said General Grillo, who retired in 1996 as a command pilot with more than 4,000 flying hours, including 800 combat hours. “He did a remarkable job capturing the feeling of flight and air and space.”

The general is most proud of the fact that the site incorporates so many aspects of the service. The thought process throughout its creation was based on inputs from all over the Air Force, from Airmen past and present.

“This is something that Airmen and the citizens of the United States can be proud of,” said Chief Master Sgt. of the Air Force Rodney McKinley. “It represents the best of what we have to offer in the Air Force.”

The sheer size of the memorial is enough to humble anyone. But it’s the sum of all its parts that really tell the story of what the Air Force and its Airmen are all about. ✈

courtesy photo

A model of the memorial depicts its intended finished appearance which will be unveiled to the public Oct. 14. The official dedication of the memorial kicks off the service’s 60th anniversary commemoration, “Heritage to Horizons,” which runs from October through 2007 and will be recognized at events Air Force-wide.



Memorial Must-Sees

The Spires – The tallest of the three spires is 270 feet tall. The base of the memorial is about 132 feet above sea level, totaling 402 feet above sea level. Made out of stainless steel and reinforced with cement, the spires together weigh about 7,300 tons, with 5,000 tons below the ground. The “ball-in-box” damping system allows the spires to sustain high winds. The spires contain 13 lead balls, each 2,000 pounds and 20 inches in diameter, that are encased in stainless steel shells that roll freely within octagonal boxes lined with synthetic damper pads. As the balls impact the damping pads, energy is dissipated and structural movement is constrained.

The Honor Guard — An eight-foot tall, bronze sculpture shows four Honor Guard Airmen standing at attention. Originally purposed to be a relief, the project evolved into the sculptures to complement the size of the spires. The sculptor wanted the undefined figures to become recognizable as individuals, reflecting the diversity of gender and races that strengthens the composition of the Air Force.

The Star – The Air Force “star” is embedded in

granite beneath the spires. Traditionally, the star has appeared on Air Force aircraft and missiles, and is in the center of all enlisted rank insignia. It represents the people of the Air Force

The Runway to Glory and parade ground — The parade ground runs parallel to the spires and the parking lot and will be available for retirements and enlistment ceremonies. Intersecting the parade ground and leading up to the spires is the “Runway to Glory” which will be painted to resemble an Air Force flightline.

The Inscription Walls — Located at both ends of the central lawn, the two walls are 56 feet long, 10 feet tall and one foot thick. Made out of Jet Mist granite, each wall honors specific Air Force achievements. The south wall honors Air Force values and campaign accomplishments, while the north wall honors the valor and sacrifices of numerous Airmen.

Missing Man Contemplation Wall — Made out of five layers of low iron glass, the wall is nine feet wide and 10 feet tall. The Missing Man formation is engraved on the front and back of the glass, and is illuminated from below. It represents those who have paid the ultimate sacrifice.